

Exercise Linked to Reduced Worker Productivity

By Erin O'Brien



While this may be the excuse some workers are looking for to spend less time working out, this title is slightly misleading. A recent study found that while exercise may help some workers feel less stressed, it could also make them less productive. The workers studied were also found to have very high levels of job stress and exercised frequently to try and cope with the stress. However, it was found that workers who have high job stress and also a high level of physical activity were significantly less productive.

The underlying cause of reduced productivity is not the high level of physical activity

however; the study found that these workers were less productive due to their high levels of job stress. Workers who are stressed on the job also tend to be less healthy, which can lead to reduced productivity. The same study found that workers with higher body-mass index (BMI) worked less, whether due to reduced productivity or time off due to illness, regardless of any other factors. So in short, while healthy workers can be happy and productive workers, stressed and unhappy workers tend to be unhealthy and less productive.

The important thing for both workers and employers to remember is that workers who are stressed will be less productive. Job stress

CORE HEALTH

is defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources or needs of the worker. Job stress can lead to poor health or injury. Various studies about job stress have found that one-fourth of employees view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives, and that problems at work are more strongly associated with health complaints than financial or family problems.

Each worker will cope with job stress differently. Some adapt to their jobs and are able to handle the stress without an adverse effect on their health or productivity, while others lack natural coping mechanisms and will allow the job stress to negatively affect their performance and health. What may be stressful to one person may not be a problem for someone else. Scientific evidence suggests that certain working conditions are stressful to most people. This evidence argues for a greater emphasis on working conditions as the key source of job stress and for a job redesign as the primary prevention strategy.

Recognizing conditions that may lead to job stress is important in prevention. Some of these conditions are:

- The design of tasks—heavy workload, infrequent rest breaks and long work hours
- Management style—poor communication in the organization, lack of family-friendly policies
- Interpersonal relationships—poor social environment and lack of support from coworkers or supervisors
- Work roles—conflicting or uncertain job expectations, too much responsibility
- Career concerns—job insecurity, lack of opportunity for growth or advancement
- Environmental conditions—unpleasant or dangerous physical conditions

If workers are experiencing some or all of these conditions, they may start to exhibit signs of job stress. These include:

- Musculoskeletal disorders—especially back and upper extremity conditions
- Psychological disorders—such as depression and burnout
- Cardiovascular disease—high blood pressure is an early warning sign

Prevention of job stress is the key to productive and healthy workers. Individual and situational factors that can help to reduce the effects of stressful working conditions include:



- Balance between work and family or personal life
- A support network of friends and coworkers
- A relaxed and positive outlook

The best way to prevent job stress or reduce the incidence of worker job stress is to promote an environment of recognition, opportunity and compassion for workers. A healthy organization will have characteristics associated with low-stress work and high levels of productivity. Examples of these characteristics include:

- Recognition of employees for good work performance
- Opportunities for career development
- An organizational culture that values the individual worker
- Management actions that are consistent with organizational values

By identifying problems, either in the individual worker's job or throughout the organi-

zation, employers and workers can both take steps to reduce job stress. Once problems are identified, interventions need to be designed and implemented and, finally, the interventions should be evaluated for effectiveness. The benefits of a low-stress job environment will pay off in the long run for the employer, but even more so for the worker.

Erin O'Brien, MS, ATC is a Certified Athletic Trainer and marketing coordinator for O'Brien International, the association management company that manages the Concrete Sawing & Drilling Association. O'Brien received her Bachelor of Science degree in Athletic Training from Ohio University and her Master of Science degree in Applied Physiology and Kinesiology from the University of Florida. She is a regular contributor to Concrete Openings magazine. She can be reached at erin@csda.org or 727-577-5002.