Workplace Stress and Health: Creating a Supportive Work Environment

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When asking the question "What determines health?" it is important to note that social factors can be powerful determinants of health status. The workplace environment and workplace stress, specifically, have been found to have significant impacts on health. Stress from the workplace has been clearly associated with greater propensities for health risk factors including obesity, smoking, reduced leisure time and physical activity, more baseline illness, and higher blood pressure.[1-3] An understanding of these correlations is necessary for any effort to bring sustainable approaches to healthcare.

Factors Impacting Workplace Stress

Demand and Control

It is not simply work demands placed on an employee that cause stress; rather, it is the combination of high demand and low control. This combination can predict higher rates of absence at work from physical and mental illness.[4,5]

Social Support

A higher level of social support in the workplace has protective effects on mental health and reduces absence from sickness. Conversely, lack of support from both supervisors and colleagues has been associated with worse mental and physical health outcomes.[4,6]

Effort-Reward Balance

The relationship between high effort and appropriate reward is essential to good health outcomes. High effort by itself may not be stressful, but to keep it balanced the effort must be matched with appropriate rewards—measured in terms of esteem, career opportunities, and financial compensation.

Job Security

Significant research exists on the effects of unemployment and job insecurity on health. Studies have shown that during periods of significant job insecurity, workers who feel themselves at risk of unemployment suffer more physical and mental ill health then their unaffected counterparts.[4,7]

Organizational Change

Poorly managed organizational change can cause significant worker stress. In general, downsizing, unjust procedures, and unfair treatment of workers significantly and negatively affect health.

Creating a Supportive Work Environment

Improved work conditions can lead to a healthier work force and greater productivity. Increased levels of support from managers, effective communication, appropriate rewards, and

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Strategies for Creating a Supportive Workplace Environment

1. Demand and Control
- ▸ Create opportunities for appropriate involvement in decision making for employees at all levels of the workplace (eg, input on any changes in office policies or office space and opportunities to give feedback on both important and day-to-day issues).
- ▸ Introduce mechanisms for measuring and monitoring employees' level of control over their work (eg, regular meetings between staff members and supervisors, and job assessments that include employee feedback).

2. Social Support
- ▸ Facilitate mutual support between colleagues (eg, create social opportunities for employees to mix and mingle and give company acknowledgment of accomplishments).
- ▸ Address antisocial behavior among employees.
- ▸ Create opportunities for clear and consistent communication from managers (eg, establish effective systems of communication including regular contact with supervisors and frequent team meetings).

3. The Effort-Reward Balance
- ▸ This balance may best be achieved by improving rewards—esteem, career opportunities, and financial compensation—rather than reducing efforts.
- ▸ Increase praise and encouragement for individual development as well as raising salaries.
- ▸ Institute a tiered reward structure for efforts and accomplishments.

4. Job Security
- ▸ Jobs should be made as secure as possible or, if unavoidable, a period of job insecurity should be resolved quickly.
- ▸ Workers should be kept informed about job status and security to reduce anxiety and maintain job satisfaction.

5. Organizational Change
- ▸ If organizational change is unavoidable, attempts should be made to minimize job losses and reduce adverse effects of change, such as increased workload, on the remaining staff.
- ▸ After periods of change, restorative strategies (eg, opportunities to meet with supervisors and other employees, clearly communicated outcomes of change, and opportunities to provide feedback about the change) should be implemented to instill and restore morale.

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the ability to have input on workplace decisions may reduce ill health and sickness absence. A good balance between the effort expended by employees and a clear reward structure will promote good mental and physical health.

For more information about the Teleosis Institute, please visit, www. teleosis.org.

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