

Safety and Health

SAFETYSHARES!

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Stress and Workplace Accidents

Thinking that mental health problems are, in some way, not as real as physical ones is not uncommon. This year, millions of Internet users have asked Google if mental illness is real, and the Internet abounds with public awareness campaigns from the government and non-profit organizations answering with a resounding “Yes!” Anxiety disorders are real, serious medical conditions — just as real and serious as physical disorders such as heart disease or diabetes.

Some workers carry stress from their homes to their jobs. Others bring their work stress back home with them at night. Regardless, workers experience stress, and a stressed worker has the potential to be an unsafe worker. But few employers in the United States have successfully addressed job stress as a safety concern.

It is common for folks to “stuff their feelings” and hide their stress. But stress doesn’t go away. As experts have been expressing in recent years, it’s all stored in your body somewhere. It’s stored mentally and it’s stored physically.

Physical activity is a great stress relief. Such as going to the gym, where you run or you swim or you bicycle or whatever it is – you burn off a lot of the residue of the adrenaline and other adrenal-cortical hormones that have been released into the system. But so many people are couch potatoes, and they go home, and they sit down. . . . Or many of us go to the doctor and say, ‘I’m under stress,’ and the doctor says, ‘Well, here, take this Valium or Librium’ or whatever they prescribe today. These drugs do not remove the source of our stress; they only mask our feelings, but the problem doesn’t go away.

According to experts, when you’re under stress, one of the things that is on your mind is the source of the stress, therefore, creating a distraction. And while distractions may be a burden, they are also precursors for an accident. Even if a worker’s troubles stem from home, their safety at work could be jeopardized. In the case a workplace incident, a simple scenario can be presented. For instance, you’ve got a sick parent in the hospital, and you get to work and you’re climbing a ladder or you’re on scaffolding. While you’re walking along on the scaffolding, part of your attention is on where you’re walking and what you’re doing, but also part of your attention is on your sick mother in the hospital. Loss of focus or inattention is a major cause of injury.

It's easy to tell whether a worker is wearing a hard hat, safety goggles or other piece of personal protective equipment. However, an intangible such as a person's stress level isn't always easy to identify. However, warning signs do exist. The Center for the Promotion of Health in the *New England Workplace* has identified more than a dozen potential signs of job stress. Some of the most prevalent are:

- Trouble concentrating
- Fatigue
- Low morale
- Anxiety or irritability
- Alcohol or drug use
- Overeating or loss of appetite
- Workplace incidents
- Workplace violence

OSHA has recognized a number of work factors and organizational practices that serve as potential job stressors. Among them: excessive workload, fear of being laid off, unreasonable performance demands and infrequent breaks. Organizational practices that can trigger stress include favoritism, inflexible rules, low pay and benefits, poor communication, and lack of input on decisions.

Within the workplace, we can all make a difference to help reduce job stress, or prevent it from building, as SME's in the area of workplace stress place an emphasis through fostering positive, communicative relationships throughout the organization.

The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) provides an example of a way to broach the subject to someone feeling stressed after he/she made a mistake. First, the event cannot be ignored or overlooked (thinking this will be a one-time event and therefore, the situation does not need to be addressed as it may upset the individual or trigger a negative response could be a mistake). It is important to discuss the event in a calm manner, while being clear about what happened and let the person know that they did indeed, make a mistake. The next step is to allow the person the opportunity to come up with a corrective action and through employee empowerment, include them in the implementation process. The significance of their participation should be based on their knowledge of the specific work task. This is known as providing an individual with a way out; allowing them to deal with the issues while being clear about your feedback.

This is not to say, every situation can be handled in such a simplistic fashion. Many times, our stress can be complicated and require the aid of professional help. Nevertheless, our ability to recognize stress in the workplace can be a critical factor to control a serious outcome. If you feel you cannot properly address the situation to your co-worker, the next step is to get your supervisor involved so that, if warranted, professional help can be discussed and provided.

Only in the Darkness Can You See the Stars

Martin Luther King