

Stress: Can It Kill Us?

Stress. Given today's current economic environment, it's becoming a fact of life. In fact, in the American Psychological Association's 2008 "Stress in America" survey, eight out of 10 people indicated that the economy is a significant cause of stress.¹

But with heart disease being the number one killer of both men and women in the United States today,² we need to be aware of the medical consequences all this stress is having on our bodies. Researchers have long felt that there was a correlation between heart disease and stress, but had no research to back it up. However, thanks to two British studies, there seems to be some strong evidence to support this theory.

Workplace Stress Linked to Coronary Heart Disease

As part of University College London's Whitehall II study, which has followed the health of London-based civil servants since 1985, researchers found that stress, and more specifically workplace stress, can be associated with coronary heart disease (CHD). For men and woman under the age of 50, the risk is especially high; they have a 68 percent better chance of contracting heart disease than their nonstressed counterparts. Dr. Tarani Chandola, author of the study, stated that while stress at work was previously not associated with CHD, the underlying reasons had not been clear. "The most important new finding was the evidence linking work stress with the biological mechanisms underlying CHD."³

To put it simply, researchers found that workers who suffered from greater stress were more prone to metabolic syndrome, a group of factors that, when combined, increase the risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes.⁴ "This is the first large scale population study

looking into the effects of stress measured from everyday working life on heart disease," said Chandola, "one of the problems is that people have been skeptical whether work stress really affects a person biologically."⁵ The study also concluded that work stress encouraged unhealthy habits such as smoking, lack of exercise and poor eating habits; all of which can increase the likelihood of contracting heart disease.

Happier Employees Less Likely to Have Heart Attacks, Strokes

The second study, also from University College London, measured 6,576 participants in the Scottish Health Study by asking questions regarding their general happiness as well as collecting physical data. What they found in the seven-year study was that the individuals who had a high level of psychological stress were 50 percent more likely to have a cardiovascular event (i.e. heart attack or stroke) than their happier counterparts. Dr.

Roland Van Kanel, head of the Psychocardiology Unit of the Swiss Cardiovascular Center at the University of Bern, upon reading the study commented that "this helps us to better understand the relative contributions of stress related change in the behavior and physiology leading to heart disease." Proactive action such as smoking cessation programs, encouraging increased physical activity and stress management techniques may decrease the incidents of CHD; however, further study is needed.⁶

In 2009, heart disease is projected to cost more than \$304 billion in health care services, medication and lost productivity.² However, it doesn't have to be this way. Much of heart disease can be prevented by exercising regularly and following a healthy lifestyle.



Simple Ways to Reduce Stress

So what can you do, both for yourself and for your employees? The following are some simple ways to reduce stress:

- Adopt healthy eating habits – too much junk food can cause obesity, which can increase the chances of heart disease.
- Exercise regularly to help maintain a health weight.
- Get enough sleep so that the body can refresh itself after a stressful day.
- Give yourself enough time to get things done and learn to say “no” or “not now” when the need arises.

The benefits of promoting a healthy lifestyle can prove to be financially beneficial to employers as well. Recently, two University of Michigan law professors examined Fortune’s 100 Best Places to Work list. What they found was that “if workers have increased stress tied to the effects of the economic downturn and the impact on their benefits, the prospect of having a

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Some Common Warning Signs of Stress

- Dizziness
- Headache
- Rapid Heartbeat
- Sweating or sweaty palms
- Nausea
- Forgetfulness
- Difficulty making decisions
- Loss of sense of humor
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Frequent mood swings
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Compulsive eating
- Explosive actions
- Withdrawal from relationships or social situations

Source: WebMD; Heart Disease & Stress

peaceable workplace may decline and...a company’s bottom line may suffer.”⁷ The Centers for Disease Control offer the following suggestions on ways you can promote a healthy lifestyle in the workplace:⁸

- Encourage good nutrition by promoting healthy options in cafeterias and vending machines.
- Promote awareness of the risk factors and signs of heart attacks and strokes.
- Provide blood pressure and cholesterol screenings to help educate employees about heart disease.
- Establish and support worksite wellness programs.

When a company has healthier, happier employees, it can translate into a reduction in absenteeism and an increase in productivity, thereby increasing a company’s bottom line. Not a bad thing in today’s volatile environment.

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