

SIEC Alert #42, October 2000

Stress In The Workplace

Work is an activity central to the lives and well-being of most people. It provides not only the economic means to survival but also the disposable income for the acquisition of those things we desire. Work, paid or voluntary, also contributes to our sense of self-esteem, community connection, and it is a source of needed routine and structure (Wahl, 2000: 39).

However, even though work confers these benefits and others, it also is a significant source of stress for many people. A 1997 survey of 890 Canadian adults revealed that two of the main sources of stress were work and concerns about unemployment (COMPAS, n.d.: 2). British studies have found that many people attribute the cause of their mental health problems to their job (Creed, 1993: 1082).

The cost of time lost from work because of mental health problems is enormous:

- Over 91 million working days each year in the UK. Stress-related absences cost an estimated £4 billion annually (Gray, 2000: 3-4).
- According to Statistics Canada, the annual cost of work time lost to stress stands at \$12 billion (CMHA, 2000).

Factors Causing Stress In The Workplace

While some people find that small amounts of stress can act as a positive motivator, many other workers are negatively affected by stress. Excessive amounts can lead to physical and mental health problems, including thoughts of suicide. Contributory factors to workplace stress often cited in the literature are:

- Unreasonably long hours, too much or not enough work
- Threats to personal safety
- Role ambiguity or conflict
- Poor communication between management and staff, and between peers
- Job insecurity caused by downsizing or cutbacks
- Negative office politics
- Physical environment, e.g. noise levels, air quality, crowding
- A job perceived to be meaningless or offering little satisfaction
- A lack of autonomy or control over how the job is performed
- Few or no prospects of career growth, advancement or promotion
- Tension between work and home responsibilities
- Participation or non-participation in decision making
- A lack of support or help from coworkers or supervisors

Strategies For Coping With Work Place Stress

In a British survey of over 800 companies, 98% of respondents thought that the mental health of employees should be a company concern. Despite this, less than 1 in 10 of these companies had an official policy on mental health (Gray, 2000: 2). In a Canadian survey, the majority of respondents perceived their employers as being ineffective in dealing with employee stress (COMPAS: 5).

Yet, aside from the benefit to the individual employee, organizations that promote well-being, including mental health, enhance their own competitive position (Wilkinson, 2000: 13).

Strategies That Can be Used to help Employees Cope With Job Stress:

- Involve employees in identifying concerns related to the physical environment and creating practical solutions to deal with these (Health Canada, 1998: 7).
- Examine policies and practices governing management and interpersonal relationships between management and employees as well as between employees (Health Canada: 7).
- Help employees balance work and home life by building flexibility into work schedules when possible (NIOSH: 15).
- Give workers opportunities to participate in decisions and actions directly affecting their jobs (NIOSH: 15).
- Design jobs that provide meaning, stimulation, and opportunities for workers to use their skills and knowledge (NIOSH: 15).

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Suicidal Behaviours in the Workplace

Rickgarn (1989) states that "anyone can intervene if he recognizes the signals given by a depressed or potentially suicidal person" (39). However, he also mentions that many people fear being involved with a suicidal person and this may block an opportunity for a positive intervention (39-40). Strategies to overcome this fear and others may include:

- Educating employees, management and EAP personnel about suicide, the factors that may lead to suicidal thinking, and warning signs.
- Identifying community resources and referral options before there is a crisis (Hughes, 1991: 268; Rickgarn: 40).
- Letting employees know that intervening does not mean continual involvement in the counseling process (Rickgarn: 39-40).

After A Suicide Attempt

A major concern for employees returning to their job after a suicide attempt or a psychiatric hospitalization is what their colleagues will think of them (Hughes: 268). Research has shown that a psychiatric diagnosis or treatment can lead to incorrect assumptions about the competence, character and potential of a person so treated (Wahl, 2000: 39).

There are steps that employers can take to ease the return to work and some of these are:

- Safeguarding the confidentiality of the employee while managing rumour control within the workplace (Rickgarn: 40).
- Ensuring that other employees understand that gossip and innuendo are not appropriate and that they should treat the individual with the same respect that they would expect if something should happen to them (Rickgarn: 40).
- Ensuring that the returning employee is treated with respect and not as a curiosity (Rickgarn: 40).
- Providing an atmosphere in which the employee can talk openly about the attempt if they choose to (Rickgarn: 40).
- Providing supports for the employee, including flexible hours, modified work environments and time off for treatment (Wahl: 41).

SIEC Resources*

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Additional Resources

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Web-Based Resources

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