



EXERCISE

YOUR

BOTTOM—Line that is!

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These days, it is difficult to escape information about the health benefits of exercise. It is seemingly ubiquitous. Whether watching the television, flipping through a magazine, or just trying to relax at the park, chances are, there is an infomercial, advertisement, or jogger all touting the advantages of a good sweat. Another omnipresent and possibly even more difficult to avoid concept is stress—although we rarely conjure up positive images or promote the benefits. This is especially telling when it comes to workplace stress.

Stress is defined as the psychological and physical state that results when the resources of the individual are not sufficient to cope with the demands and pressures of the situation. Situations that are likely to cause stress are those that are unpredictable or uncontrollable, uncertain, ambiguous or unfamiliar, or involving conflict, loss or performance expectations (Michie, 2002).

Stress may be caused by time limited events, such as the pressures of examinations or work deadlines, or by ongoing situations, such as family demands, job insecurity, or long commuting journeys. As it applies to the workplace, a feeling of powerlessness is a universal cause of job stress (APA, 2004). The occupations that are frequently put in high stress situations include secretaries, waitresses, middle managers, police officers, editors and medical interns. These sectors are identified by the need to respond to others' demands and timetables, with little control over events (American Psychological Association, 2004).

At this point, you may be questioning why any of this is important—better yet, why would this be important to a company? Why should they care? Well, for one, workers are experiencing increased tension and uncertainty, and are updating their resumes (APA, 2004). That means that employers are at risk of losing a worker who could very well

be doing a great job, and incur costly turnover costs simply because the job environment is unbearable. What is more, if this high stress situation persists, there is no guarantee that the next employee is going to stick around.

Even that threat, however, often times will not resonate with employers. Want to know what will? The Bottom Line! Money that is. How can the benefits of exercise and a healthy lifestyle affect the organization's bottom line? Health-oriented organizational interventions can have a positive impact because these strategies have been proven to decrease the incidence of certain diseases that are likely to have an adverse effect on the productivity of an organization (Lloyd & Foster, 2006).

The message to employers is clear: if you pay health insurance for your employees, keeping your employees healthy is your business (Gilliam, 2006). Like with other consultative activities, health-related and performance enhancement interventions may be deployed at one of three organizational

consultation levels: individual, group, or organizational.

Examples of these interventions at the individual levels include teaching individuals stress management techniques, helping individuals to stop smoking, and encouraging individuals to adhere to an exercise regimen (Lloyd & Foster, 2006)

Organizational psychology consultants can assist organizations in reducing health risk factors by helping establish smoking cessation, nutritional counseling, stress management, and physical activity programs (Lloyd & Foster, 2006). Gilliam (2006) recommends implementing a company-wide fitness program and figuring out creative ways to make employee wellness a year-round adventure.

In addition, employers should concern themselves with the health and fitness level of their employees to help them stay alert in the workplace (Consumer Reports on Health, 2006; Gilliam, 2006). For instance, the most recent (2006) Consumer Reports on Health study revealed that stress triggers the release

of hormones that can impair memory and even damage brain cells. The report went on to say that regular physical activity is probably the best-documented way to shield your brain against aging, by protecting the cardiovascular system that feeds blood to the brain. In a January 2006 study of about 1,700 older Seattle residents, it was revealed that even modest amounts of exercise had an impact on health, such as reducing dementia. A mere walk of at least three times a week were about 30 percent less likely to develop dementia during the six-year study than less-active individuals.

In a study by Bryant, Fairbrother, & Fenton (2000), regular exercise habit was shown to be correlated with reduced workplace stress ratings. The findings support a previously unreported view that nurses are unlikely to bring their personal stress with them to the workplace rather the workload characteristics of the workplace itself are the principle stress determinants.

In general stress management programs in the work place that include relaxation therapies, exercise, and biofeedback have been shown to reduce the physiological symptoms such as hypertension, and increase job satisfaction and job performance. A short form of meditation, daily exercise program and the use of heart rate or thermal biofeedback can be helpful to a worker experiencing occupational stress (APA 2004; Bryant, Fairbrother, & Fenton, 2000; Lloyd & Foster, 2006).

Consulting psychologists can assist in the creation of health and life-enhancing workplaces. It is possible to further augment the effectiveness of employees by incorporating strategies from health psychology and sports psychology into the toolkit of consulting psychologists (Lloyd & Foster, 2006). At this point, there is enough credible research to support the relationship between exercise and reduced stress. So why not add this to your repertoire of workplace interventions? What is there to lose?—besides a few extra pounds that is.

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