

STRESS MANAGEMENT: BACK TO WORK

For most of us, work is a valuable and often critical part of our lives as we spend a sizeable portion of our daily lives at our respective workplaces. Our work oftentimes is also imperative to our personal identity and self-esteem as it provides us with the sense that we are doing something meaningful and contributing to the world around us. However, for many, the very thought of work can spark the feeling of dread, especially as we transition away from the summer. This newsletter looks at some major sources of job stress as well as suggests steps that organizations and employees can take to alleviate stress in their daily work lives.

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association (2018), stress results when demands of a situation are greater than the resources we possess to handle it. Unfortunately, there are certain workplace stressors that intensify stress and our reaction to certain job demands, as they elevate levels of pressure and anxiety. These stressors include:

- Toxic, abusive, unfair, and/or unsafe workplace environments
- Lack of support, training, and/ or growth in employment opportunities
- Excessive workloads
- Low salaries or lack of appreciation at work
- Conflict with co-workers and/or supervisors
- Unfulfilling or unchallenging work

In the face of these stressors, employees may also face health issues associated with their mental health, like insomnia, headaches, short temper, weaker immune system, and heart issues. As such, workplace stress acts as a double-edged sword given that several Canadians end up missing work due to stress, leading to negative consequences for their employers. These consequences include:

- Rise in truancy, lack of productivity and/or employee engagement
- Decline in quality of work
- Decline in collaborative team work among colleagues

It is important to note, however, that some stress can be beneficial, even crucial, for employee engagement and work performance. The report, “Psychological Health in the Workplace” by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), talks about how peak performance occurs when an employee experiences an optimal level of stress and therefore feels motivated, challenged, and engaged without feeling overly anxious. Unfortunately, when stress exceeds the optimal level for a particular employee, their employee performance is invariably weakened or impaired. The goal therefore is not to eliminate stress completely but to manage/maintain the level of stress so that it builds confidence and helps employees achieve healthy results. Practices that employers can adopt to

achieve this include:

- Examine workplace culture and determine ways to improve levels of employee engagement, workplace relations, and reduce stress.
- Establish a system to fairly reward, compensate, and/or appreciate employees for their work.
- Employment and Social Development Canada recommends developing workplace psychological health programs and involving employees in their development.
- ESDC also recommends establishing an incident-reporting system and a conflict resolution system.
- Offer routine training and growth opportunities to employees.
- Managers and supervisors should regularly meet with employees to discuss workload, job expectations and responsibilities, and establish reasonable deadlines for projects.
- Identify situations that cause stress and find ways to reduce stress in those situations. For instance, if you notice that you are running late to work most mornings and find yourself often feeling anxious as a result, strive to go to bed earlier and wake up at least 15 minutes earlier in the morning.
- Take frequent short breaks during the workday and do something completely different, i.e. take a short brisk walk, talk to a co-worker, go out for some fresh air, do some stretches, practice mindfulness etc.
- Take a longer break/vacation away from the office. There is a reason why most employers offer paid vacation; breaks help employees decompress and feel rejuvenated so that they are happier and more productive when they return to work.
- Strive to achieve work-life balance. Spend time with family and friends, and do things that bring you joy.
- Learn time-management skills and prioritize tasks that are more important, time-consuming, and challenging.
- Ask for help. If you are struggling with a project or are experiencing other problems at work, talk to your manager and/or a trusted co-worker.
- Report any incident of workplace abuse, harassment, or discrimination.

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