

VACATION, PAID TIME OFF HELP REDUCE WORK STRESS

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Why It Matters:

- Unmanaged work stress can lead to lack of sleep, overeating, smoking, and increased alcohol use.
- Excessive stress can negatively affect the health and well-being of employees and cost billions of dollars in lost productivity and absenteeism.
- Keeping workplace stress under control and focusing on “recovery” may enhance performance.

Encountering some stress at work is inevitable, especially when big projects and major deadlines loom.

Some stress actually can enhance your performance in the short term. But when stress constantly creeps in and leads to unhealthy habits and illness, its impact on employees and employers can be detrimental.

Stress is the body’s reaction to change, and it can cause your breathing and heart rate to speed up. Continued unmanaged stress can result in lack of sleep, overeating, smoking, and increased alcohol use. Those unhealthy responses can contribute to high blood pressure, obesity, and diabetes – all risk factors for heart disease and stroke.

“Stress is the health epidemic of the 21st century,” said Dr. Suzanne Steinbaum, a cardiologist and American Heart Association Go Red For Women spokesperson. “Stress is something that is not to be taken lightly.”

Personal stress related to finances, child care, or family illness can add to work-related stress. Together, it’s a much deeper problem.

“We don’t live in a silo when we get to work,” Steinbaum said. “One always bleeds into the other.”

Unmanaged stress can make you “feel as though you can’t get your work done,” let alone engage in healthy activities such as nutritious eating and exercise, said Dr. Nieca Goldberg, a cardiologist and medical director of the Joan H. Tisch Center for Women’s Health at NYU Langone Health and an American Heart Association spokesperson. Some stressed employees report that trying to find time in their schedule to exercise causes further stress, Goldberg added.

Employees of all ages experience work-related stress, but Goldberg said women can be particularly susceptible because they are so accustomed to taking care of others.

“You can’t do everything, so you have to delegate,” she said.

The cost of stress

Total annual expenditures on work-related stress have been estimated at \$190 billion, and the cost of poor mental health has been estimated at \$211 billion per year, according to the report “Resilience in the Workplace,” conducted by the American Heart Association Center for Workplace Health Research and Evaluation. Half of those costs come from lost productivity and absenteeism.

The report was commissioned by the American Heart Association’s CEO Roundtable, a leadership collaborative of CEOs from some of the nation’s largest businesses to improve health on the job and thus in communities. The report explored the effects of resiliency training programs on health, well-being, and productivity.

Employees want help dealing with stress, the study found.

While the report notes that more research is needed to better define and understand the concept of resilience, it examined the steps several companies are taking to help workers better manage stress and well-being.

One case in point

Deloitte, part of the CEO Roundtable and one of the employers featured in the study, approaches employee well-being, including stress, in a holistic fashion, said Jen Fisher, managing director of well-being at Deloitte LLP.

Deloitte values the “brain power of our people,” which impacts service to clients, so worker well-being is of high importance to the organization, Fisher said. “It’s basically a business imperative for us.”

Stress is needed at times, but the organization tries to find ways to use it as a performance enhancer by also emphasizing “recovery,” Fisher said.

That can mean a five- to 15-minute break between meetings; using chair yoga or breathing exercises to rejuvenate on the job; or taking advantage of vacation or other paid time off. In fact, the company has a year-end shutdown for several days, when everyone takes time off at once in a “collective disconnect.”

Simple ways to de-stress

At almost any workplace, there are ways to alleviate stress, Goldberg and Steinbaum say.

When possible, try to take a break from your desk, and walk around a bit or run in place. Step outside to breathe fresh air, and take a short walk.

Instead of grabbing a doughnut, enjoy a healthy lunch you've brought from home, or walk to a nearby salad bar. Split your lunch hour, spending half the time eating and half walking. Have lunch with a friend, and engage in conversation that doesn't revolve around work.

Try meditation, perhaps using an app that explains deep breathing exercises. Meditation has been shown to help lower blood pressure and improve well-being.

Find ways to shut off work-related electronic devices in the evening so you can relax during your time off and get enough sleep.

"The end of the day is the end of the day," Steinbaum said. "The phone needs to be out of the bedroom."

Taking vacation time or personal days you are allotted is important for reducing stress. This recovery time can provide a change in perspective. When you are taking a day off or you are away on a trip, avoid or limit your connections to office email and voice messages.

"Time off is so critical. It's a change in perspective," Steinbaum said. "Take it and use it."

Leadership and a 'welcoming work culture'

Stress management initiatives at work are most effective when a company's leaders engage and participate, experts say. The mindset filters down to mid-level managers and all employees and creates "a more welcoming work culture," Goldberg said.

Fisher of Deloitte agreed. She tries to lead by example by checking email only once a day when taking time off and by letting colleagues know she doesn't expect them to be connected to their devices while away.

"People have to really feel it, and they really have to feel supported," she said, adding that the focus on employee well-being is good for business in the long run and that many employers are coming to that conclusion.

"We're all in a war for talent," she said. "This is something that's here to stay."

Things to Consider

- Try to eat healthy, exercise, and take breaks to counter excessive workplace stress.
- At home and on days off, attempt to disconnect from work electronic devices.
- Consider participating if your workplace has a stress management and well-being program.