



Supervisor Newsletter

Chronic Stress: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Issues

COVID-19 has resulted in an increase in employee mental health issues, substance abuse, and a spike in drug overdose deaths.

Employees continue to feel the effects of the pandemic. Many workers are still worried about the risk of exposure to the virus at work, and those who work remotely are having to deal with children at home, getting the food and supplies they need, and loved ones who have been laid off and/or tested positive for COVID-19.

The long-present increased levels of stress remain, even as the hope of the end of the initial crisis subsides. This chronic stress takes a significant toll on employees' health and wellbeing. Stress is quickly growing into a major health epidemic with serious consequences for both employers and employees.

Supervisors need to be reminded that the uncertainty and anxiety that so many workers continue to experience can lead to drug and/or alcohol abuse. Prolonged stress can also result in domestic disputes, family violence, child neglect, and suicide. These personal issues can of course cause serious problems in the workplace.

The good news is that supervisors can play an important role in improving the mental health and well-being of workers.

One way that supervisors can help is to identify employees who are exhibiting warning signs of mental health issues and/or substance misuse, and get that person the help he or she needs.

Signs & Symptoms to Look For

Here are some common reactions to chronic stress:

- Becoming easily frustrated on a regular basis.
- Being too tired, sad, worried, or depressed to come to work or perform work duties.
- Arguing with supervisors and/or coworkers.
- Having difficulties making decisions or staying focused on assignments.
- Complaining of feeling physically or mentally exhausted or drained.
- Being apathetic about getting work done and/or meeting deadlines.
- Loss of appetite.
- Lack of motivation.
- Inability to sleep at night.
- Reckless disregard for safety rules.
- Restlessness and anxiety.
- Irrational fear.
- Sudden bouts of crying.

If an employee is experiencing one or more of these problems frequently, it is a sign that he or she may need professional help.

Make that Referral!

Supervisors should never feel uncomfortable when referring a worker to HR, the company EAP, or to a treatment professional. Counseling can help employees with stress and mental health issues, as well as providing support with a variety of practical problems like money, marriage, grief, family violence, legal issues, childcare, and elder care. Because of social distancing requirements implemented during the pandemic, counseling can now even be done remotely through phone calls and video chat. There are also online support groups available that help people deal with a variety of issues.

Preventive Measures

For employees who *seem* to be dealing well with the stressful events of our times, the unrelenting stress could eventually result in serious health conditions. Many people hide or deny their stress, which could lead to any or all of the following problems:

- High blood pressure.
- Heart disease.
- Increased susceptibility to cancer and diabetes.
- Muscular and skeletal problems.
- Restlessness during the day and night.
- Substance abuse.
- Insomnia.
- Gastrointestinal issues.

Too many employees avoid dealing with stressful events until they end up having a heart attack or a stroke. Supervisors should always let employees know that it is okay to talk openly about their problems and concerns with HR or the company EAP.

Chronic stress can also interfere with social well-being and spread to coworkers, friends, and family. There is scientific evidence that anxious emotions (even when hidden) are physiologically contagious through pheromones. When someone emits these "fear pheromones," they can transmit anxiety and fear to others.

Some people deal with their stress by working more, but that can also be a dangerous coping mechanism. Supervisors should try to be aware of employees who may be developing "workaholicism," and try to assist those employees in achieving a better work/life balance.

Here are some preventive measures that can be shared with employees to help keep the body and mind healthy during an extended crisis:

- Get at least 7 hours of sleep each night.
- Get some form of regular exercise.
- Take regular breaks, including when working remotely.
- Eat healthy meals.
- Make time for leisure activities.
- Avoid focusing on work after the work-day has ended.
- Practice good personal hygiene.
- Take time off when sick.
- Follow your doctor's health recommendations.

One highly underrated method of dealing with stress is simply to breathe. People often dismiss or disbelieve how important deep breathing can be in dealing with stressful situations. Breathing is a rapid and reliable pathway to the nervous system that can help to regain an optimal state. Deep breathing calms one down and normalizes cortisol and other stress hormone levels.

Conclusion

Ultimately, everyone loses out when employees are stressed. Stressed out employees can be the number one enemy of a company's success. The best way to reduce stress is to address its causes. Sometimes, that is difficult to do (as in the case of a global pandemic). But even when stress is unavoidable, the pressure can be reduced by getting support from supervisors and managers who are concerned, caring, and compassionate. Employees need to understand that they are not alone and that the company they work for is there to help them through tough times so that everyone can achieve the best outcomes.