

NIOSH Advises Employers to Teach Employees to Handle Stress

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) defines job stress "as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker." The agency recommends that employers find ways to relieve employee stress because too much stress can result in job-related injuries.

There are different types of stress. The beneficial kind, sometimes referred to as "challenge," motivates employees to learn new skills. When a challenge is met, employees feel relaxed and satisfied. However, harmful stress results when job demands cannot be met. Employees feel exhausted and emotionally depleted. Such stress fosters an environment for illness, injury, and job failure.

On the basis of its research, NIOSH believes that working conditions play a primary role in causing job stress. The following is a list of work factors or "job stressors" the agency identified:

- The Design of Tasks - Heavy workloads, infrequent rest breaks, long work hours and shift work. Another important issue is routine tasks that have little inherent meaning, do not utilize a worker's skills, and leave the worker feeling powerless.
- Management Style- Lack of participation by workers in decision-making, poor organizational communication, or lack of family-friendly policies.
- Interpersonal Relationships - Poor social environment and lack of support or help from coworkers and supervisors.
- Work Roles - Conflicting or uncertain job expectations and too much responsibility.
- Career Concerns - Job insecurity and lack of opportunity for growth, advancement, or promotion.
- Environmental Conditions - Unpleasant or dangerous physical conditions, such as crowding, noise, air pollution, or ergonomic problems.

NIOSH added that employers shouldn't overlook individual factors that affect stress levels. Even when an employee is exposed to stressful working conditions, individual and other situational factors can strengthen or weaken this influence. Individual and situational factors that can help to reduce the effects of stressful working conditions include a:

- Balance between work and personal life
- Support network of friends and coworkers
- Relaxed and positive outlook

There are no standardized approaches for developing a stress prevention program according to NIOSH. Finding the appropriate solutions for an organization will depend on its size and complexity, the available resources, and the specific types of stress problems its employees face.

Although it is impossible to create a "one size fits all" program for preventing stress at work, the agency feels it is possible to offer guidelines on the process of stress prevention:

- Ensure that the workload is in line with workers' capabilities and resources.

- Design jobs to provide meaning, stimulation, and opportunities for workers to use their skills.
- Clearly define workers' roles and responsibilities.
- Give workers opportunities to participate in decisions and actions affecting their jobs.
- Improve communications and reduce uncertainty about career development and future employment prospects.
- Provide opportunities for social interaction among workers.
- Establish work schedules that are compatible with demands and responsibilities outside the job.