

CPH News and Views

A semi-monthly column on emerging topics related to healthy workplaces

Issue # 8: How can workplace health promotion professionals address job stress as a modifiable risk factor for heart disease and other chronic diseases?

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A vast body of international scientific literature has established a strong causal association between job stress and cardiovascular diseases (CVD) and other chronic health conditions. It is estimated that up to 23 percent of heart disease related deaths per year could be prevented if the levels of job strain in the most stressful occupations were reduced to average levels seen in other occupations (Karasek and Theorell, 1990). Despite this, occupational stress is rarely addressed in the design of comprehensive health promotion efforts aimed at reducing risk factors for chronic diseases. What are the obstacles to addressing occupational stress in workplace health promotion interventions and what is needed to overcome them?

We interviewed worksite wellness professionals, employee assistance professionals (EAPs), and state health department professionals to better understand how they viewed job stress issues and their roles in addressing them. Most interviewees said that their roles are to assist individuals cope more effectively with workplace stressors by promoting healthy self care. This includes providing health screenings and health risk appraisals, and teaching skills such as relaxation and meditation, conflict resolution, and healthy lifestyle behavior—all classic examples of secondary prevention (early detection of symptoms and minimizing adverse health effects). With few exceptions, interviewees said they did not view their roles as addressing working conditions to control stressors at their source—a primary prevention approach.

In order to address stress effectively as a risk factor for chronic disease, workplace health promotion professionals need to broaden their focus to include *institutional* strategies aimed at controlling workplace stressors at their source. This is consistent with current trends in health promotion towards combining behavior change with policy and environmental measures; smoke-free workplace policies and healthy dining options for employees are good examples.

What barriers do health promotion professionals perceive for addressing stress in the workplace at the organization level? Those we interviewed named several significant issues:

- There is a lack of knowledge regarding what can be done at the organizational level to reduce stress exposure in the workplace. This knowledge is typically the domain of occupational health and organizational development specialists, with whom most health promotion practitioners rarely interact.
- Employee health services are increasingly outsourced. Health promotion professionals working under contract often have less direct influence on healthy workforce policies and may be less likely to introduce new programs that challenge the status quo.
- Company leaders do not always make employee health a top priority and may view employee health costs as competing with profit potential.
- Job stress occurs as a result of social, political, and economic forces that are beyond the control of health professionals. Layoffs and understaffing are among the most common stressors in the workplace.

What resources can help health promotion professionals overcome barriers to addressing job stress in chronic disease prevention initiatives?

While some of the barriers are complex and driven by powerful economic forces, others such as knowledge gaps can be addressed locally.

First and foremost, workplace health promotion specialists need education on the substantial role of occupational stress in the development of chronic disease, and what can be done at the organizational level to control exposure to stressors. Professional meetings, trade journals, and professional association websites represent excellent opportunities to disseminate this information. For the future workforce, incorporating occupational health and safety principles into undergraduate and graduate health promotion curricula would be extremely useful to ensure that chronic disease prevention efforts address workplace stressors as one of many factors affecting employee health and wellbeing.

Second, workplace health promotion professionals need tools to make the “business case” for addressing job stress in a way that appeals to the company’s mission and financial goals. The costs associated with stress-related illness — absenteeism, poor productivity, turnover, medical claims, etc. — are significant. If business leaders understood that it will be difficult (if not impossible) to control health care costs related to CVD and other chronic diseases *without* addressing stressful working conditions, they might be motivated to commit more resources to promoting a “healthy workplace” because it is synonymous with improving the bottom line.

By raising awareness and providing models for solutions, health promotion professionals can begin to seek out appropriate partners (management, labor unions, occupational health specialists) for addressing workplace stressors in their chronic disease prevention work. As the global economy continues to place pressures on working conditions, and as the workforce ages, this issue will become increasingly important to public health and healthcare in the future.

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Recommended websites

- Job Stress Network www.workhealth.org/
- NIOSH Stress at Work www.cdc.gov/niosh/stresswk

Recommended books and journal articles:

Karasek, R.A., Theorell, T. (1990) Healthy work. Stress, productivity and the reconstruction of working life. New York NY: Basic Books.

LaMontagne A, et al. (2007) A Systematic Review of the Job-stress Intervention Evaluation Literature, 1990-2005 International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health 13: 268-280.

Belkic KL, Landsbergis PA, Schnall PL, Baker D. (2004) Is job strain a major source of cardiovascular disease risk? Scand J Work Environ Health. 2004; 30(2):85-128.

Noblet A, LaMontagne AD. (2006) [The role of workplace health promotion in addressing job stress.](#) Health Promotion International 21(4):346-353; doi:10.1093/heapro/dal029

Schnall PL, Dobson M, Rosskam E (Publication date pending) Unhealthy Work: Causes, Consequences, and Cures. Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing Company, Inc. <http://baywood.com>



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