

CPH News and Views

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

Issue # 28: Job Stress Prevention & Control: Developing Best Practice

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Exposure to job stressors predicts a variety of serious effects on mental and physical health, as well as poor health behaviours. Given the widespread exposure to job stressors among working people, this translates to large preventable burdens of job stress-related illness and disease even after accounting for other known causes. It is inequitably distributed - groups most affected include younger workers, working women, and workers in lower skilled occupations and precarious employment arrangements such as contractors and temporary workers.

Feasible and effective approaches are available to address the root causes of job stress. The best approaches are comprehensive and systemic, targeting job stress by making organizational changes to the workplace. Despite the extensive evidence in support of these approaches, however, workplace practices continue to over-emphasize behaviour change by individual workers and coping skills, with inadequate attention to the reduction of job stressors³.

Best practice approaches for job stress interventions

Reducing Stress in the Workplace, An Evidence Review is a recently published, open-access document for policy-makers and practitioners summarizing the vast evidence on job stress and its impacts on human and organizational health. Its goal is to make it easier for employers, workers, and health professionals to follow international best practice recommendations for job stress prevention and control.¹ The Report provides recommendations for best practice approaches to reducing job stress, as well as examples, web links and other references to specific resources. These recommendations and resources are organized under 7 best practice features distilled from an extensive review of the international evidence on job stress prevention and reduction.⁴ To be most effective at preventing and reducing job stress, interventions should:

- be founded on a solid evidence base with clear aims, goals and tasks;
- include a workplace risk assessment;
- be tailored to suit specific sectors, workplace sizes, and other contextual factors;
- be accessible and user-friendly to individuals at all levels of an organization;
- apply a systems or comprehensive approach, with mutually reinforcing components of the intervention aimed at working conditions, workers, and the organisation;
- facilitate competency building and skills development throughout the organization;
- be developed with the participation of those who are being targeted by the intervention.

Applying a systems approach to job stress interventions

Effective job stress interventions must use a comprehensive or systems approach to address both the causes and the consequences of job stress. This entails a combination of activities to reduce job stressors at the source (primary prevention), activities that change how workers perceive and respond to stressors (secondary prevention), and activities to treat stress-related illness and disability once it develops (tertiary prevention). These three types of changes are complementary and mutually reinforcing (see Figure 1 on next page). Workplace intervention should be complemented by policies and practices at other levels, as described in more detail elsewhere.⁵

The substantial disease burden that is related to job stress could be addressed by applying a systems approach to improving working conditions. In addition to being a concern for workers, unions, employers, occupational health and safety and workers' compensation systems, job stress should be a matter for physical and mental health promotion agencies, government public health authorities, medical practitioners, community advocacy groups and others. An optimal public health response to job stress would encompass participation by the full range of stakeholders.

