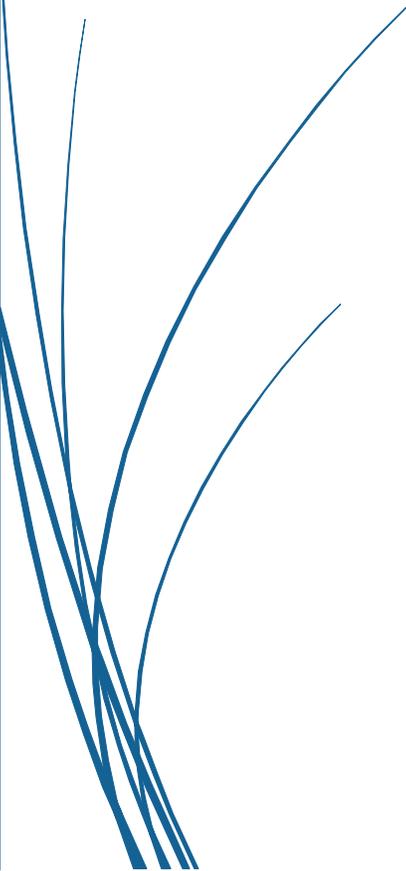




# Workplace Wellness

A Component of High Performing Teams



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER 1: STRESS AND BURNOUT AT WORK .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: PREVENTING STRESS AND BURNOUT.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3: HOW EMPLOYEE WELLNESS PROGRAMS ENHANCE CORPORATE HEALTH .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>RESOURCES: .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>SELF CARE TIP SHEET .....</b>	<b>10</b>

# Workplace Wellness

As levels of workplace stress and burnout increase, the state of health at work is going from bad to worse. The key to staying healthy in today's leaner, meaner environment is prevention. As employees and employers it's our right and responsibility to work-well. It's an investment that pays off in dollars - and in sense! If you want productive, high performing teams then listen up because stress impacts your bottom line!

## Chapter 1: Stress and Burnout at Work

According to the stress.org website, stress and burnout-related absenteeism, tardiness, low productivity, and job turnover cost American companies over 300 billion annually. That's a staggering statistic. The current 'state of health' at work is not good.

With the current downsizing in organizations employees are forced to work longer hours, work through lunch, take on more responsibility, and basically thrive on adrenaline during the work day. Long term, this causes stress, guilt, and many other physical and emotional symptoms.

The greatest causes of workplace stress and burnout can start with, simply, poor ergonomics and excessive computer use. Just placing the body in a poorly designed work station and staring at the computer for ten or more hours per day can lead to stiffness, eye strain, headaches, back aches.

That problem is compounded by eating lunch at the desk – no break, no activity – and in an office with poor air circulation and poor ventilation. Then throw in the many demands of the job, extra workloads and business travel and you have a recipe for burnout. There is just no down time.

How do stress and burnout show up in terms of symptoms? In the early stages of stress there is actually a high level of productivity and the employee seems to function quite well. It is only when the stress continues long term that the problems occur. At that point the employee is beyond the optimal level of productivity.

Their thinking capacity and function diminishes. Symptoms can be either physical or emotional in nature. They can range from headaches to high blood pressure or from a flaring temper to depression. Employees and their managers need to watch for any sudden changes in behavior, lowered productivity, over reacting, or even an excess of caffeine and sugar. Other symptoms include being a workaholic, unable to delegate, and frequent illnesses.

Burnout means a person has not had adequate down time. They have stayed in the heightened stress state for too long. Stress and burnout typically begin to impact employees at work but then takes a toll on family and personal life.

The balance between work and play is disrupted. So, the work stress has a domino effect and impacts other areas as well. The symptoms that show up at work can also show up at home and, in addition, there can be insomnia, appetite changes, relationship issues, and the start of major illness.

The outcome of a stressful workplace is reduced productivity, low morale, low retention, and continual recruitment. Ultimately and subtly this impacts a company's profit margin.

Statistics point to material gain as the reason that most Americans overwork. Americans are more interested in having a nice home, expensive cars and clothing, and a gracious appearance. Americans spend more time on the job than any other workers in the developed world. Longer than the famously industrious Japanese and Koreans, and far longer than workers in Europe, according to a new study by the United Nations International Labor Organization (Landers 2A).

In European countries there is a legally mandated paid vacation for employees. Very few countries take shorter vacations than the average United States citizen. There is also paid pre and post maternity leave with governments paying between 50 – 100% of the salary. European maternity leave can last anywhere from six weeks prior to three years after the birth.

There seems to be different expectations from European employers and they focus more on work/life balance and family – possibly stemming from the traditional European values that are centuries old. The bar clearly is being raised in the US. Expectations are being raised, and hours committed to the job clearly are going up.

## Chapter 2: Preventing Stress and Burnout

Let's take a moment to clarify what we mean by stress and burnout. The psychologist who first coined the word burnout defined it as "a state of fatigue or frustration brought about by a devotion to a cause, a way of life, or a relationship that failed to produce the expected reward."

Burnout arises from excessive demands that are either internally imposed (such as having very high expectations of yourself) or externally imposed (by family, job, or society). It occurs when you are unable to meet these demands, become frustrated, and deplete your energy through unrelenting stress.

Burnout is frequently associated with work situations in which a person feels overworked, under-appreciated, confused about expectations and priorities, given responsibilities that are not commensurate with pay, insecure about layoffs, and/or over committed with home and work responsibilities.

Stress is the reaction of the body to a perceived or present threat. Think of an airplane getting ready for take-off. Virtually all of our physiological systems are modified to meet the perceived danger.

The Gallup Poll "**Attitudes in the American Workplace VI**" found that:

-80% of workers feel stress on the job, nearly half say they need help in learning how to manage stress and 42% say their coworkers need such help;

-14% of respondents had felt like striking a coworker in the past year, but didn't;

-25% have felt like screaming or shouting because of job stress, 10% are concerned about an individual at work they fear could become violent;

-9% are aware of an assault or violent act in their workplace and 18% had experienced some sort of threat or verbal intimidation in the past year.

Given that most of us have quite a stack of responsibilities and financial commitments - what can we do to prevent stress and burnout, on a personal level?

Making changes in both you and your environment can help prevent burnout. It really comes back to that old 'chicken and egg' question; do we live to work or work to live? Balance is the key. And we must not forget moderation. Too much of anything is not healthy.

In today's economically driven leaner and meaner organizations - people put more of themselves into their work and forget how to take care of themselves. That impacts personal relationships, health, and total well-being.

- Learn to slow down and try to simplify your life. Finding balance begins with taking care of yourself. Listen to your body. That might mean changing poor eating habits, setting a boundary as to when to leave work each day, or just trying to have some fun several times a week. Since our perspective gets distorted when we are under stress, it's important to ask for feedback from those who are close to you. That may help determine what steps you need to take on a personal level.

Given that prevention is always the first choice some organizations already have a high level of stress and burnout existing within their workplaces. As an employee you can reduce and/or eliminate it by strengthening your foundation of basic health.

This means diet, exercise, water and adequate sleep. You can also reprogram your body to relax by using focused breathing, relaxation tapes and meditation. Skills development & additional job training can help you to feel in control of your work responsibilities and attitude. Also, reframing a stressful situation or placing an empowering meaning on it can also help to reduce the frustration level.

Many people learn to combat daily headaches by improving their posture, taking short breaks during the day or by remembering to eat lunch. Others take a walk at mid-day in order to get some fresh air and clear their head.

Eye strain can be caused by non-stop computer use. Many physicians recommend looking away from the computer every ten minutes to give the eyes a break. Companies are now installing special computer screens to help employees reduce eye strain.

If your company has a wellness program do you use it? Exercise in the beginning or middle of the day is very refreshing and increases productivity. Try it and see how you feel!

Snacking on healthy food during the day increases energy and eliminates that fuzzy feeling that creeps in by mid-afternoon. But rather than snacking on restaurant food bring a sack lunch from home. It is a lot healthier and will save you some money.

Preventing stress and burn out, or recovering from it, simply means learning to be aware of changes that you need to make. Think about your work day and about what stresses you out. How can it be handled differently? What steps can you take to react differently to the situation? How can you take better care of yourself during the work day?

## Chapter 3: How Employee Wellness Programs Enhance Corporate Health

Job stress is very costly. Accidents, absenteeism, employee turnover, diminished productivity, direct medical, legal, and insurance costs, workers' compensation awards as well as tort and FELA judgments are estimated to cost U.S. industry over \$300 billion each year.

This is something of a controversial topic – as employee health and wellness programs have a bit of the same reputation as employee career planning – they're as often smoke and mirrors as reality.

However, a study by the Washington Business Group on Health found that of 1,700 companies, 32% of the companies with 50 or more employees have a wellness program; almost 64% of the companies with 750 or more employees have such programs. Corporate wellness programs are out there and they are effective. Unfortunately, they are the first to go in lean times.

Employee wellness programs have long been advocated as a way to decrease healthcare costs, reduce absenteeism, and increase productivity. Here are some statistics that do back that up.

**Adolph Coors Company's** cost benefit analyses show that for the leading wellness programs in North America, every \$1 spent on wellness programs saves the corporation over \$6 in expenses associated with immediate and future costs due to illness, absenteeism, job retraining, hiring, etc.

**The Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company** of New Jersey found that workers who participate in their corporate fitness program have average medical claims that are 70% **lower** than workers who do not.

**NASA** found that when compared to the average office worker, whose efficiency decreases 50% for the final 2 hours of the working day, those who were part of a health and wellness program worked at full efficiency all day. This amounted to a 12.5% **increase in productivity**.

These statistics show that if employees are given the opportunity and the support they will participate in these programs and, ultimately, save the company money.

The typical cost of setting up an employee health and wellness program depends how elaborate a company wants to get with their program. Studies estimate that a comprehensive worksite wellness program costs an employer between \$70 and \$130 per employee annually. Even the simplest of these programs have demonstrated reduction in health care costs, inpatient stays, and sick leave.

Employee wellness programs can vary in scope and cost. You may choose anything from a good health/fitness newsletter to a full-blown program including an employee gym, health screening and full-time staff dedicated to employee wellness.

Many companies focus on fitness classes and workshops. Fitness classes generally include: strength training, yoga, Pilates, and maybe some type of cardiovascular class. Workshops are generally related to health or work/life balance topics. Some companies are even including on site massage in their programs.

In a perfect world if money was not an issue, the ideal wellness program should include a mix of mind, body, and spirit modalities, as well as tools for professional development. An example would be a complete offering of fitness classes, personal training, fitness testing, and fitness related workshops and health fairs as well as a fitness room with equipment. That would cover the physical part.

Then cater to the mind and spirit by offering massage, meditation, coaching, access to therapists, and workshops to support that.

Finally, offer training to enhance skill development and career pathing. Follow that up with periodic surveys to see what changes, if any, need to be made.

Companies can also provide filtered water and healthier food in vending machines.

With these things in place a company is sure to see immediate results in productivity that would be well worth the money they are spending on the wellness program.

An organization should explore what type of employee health and wellness program is right for its environment and employees. It often helps to survey the employees and obtain feedback.

In addition, the organization needs to evaluate what they are hearing and seeing regarding their employees. For example, if there is low morale, they may need to implement stress management workshops or assertiveness training. If their health insurance dollars are increasing, they would want to look at physical fitness and nutritional programs. Some corporations, contract trained therapists to work with employees on emotional issues.

Once an organization has evaluated the situation and received employee feedback, it's best to research reputable companies that offer the needed services. And it's important to remember that the structure of a good wellness program will change and evolve as the corporation's needs change.

## Resources

There are many resources that can help you to reduce stress in the workplace. The following tip sheet offers web site links to educational articles about stress, self-care, and a directory of holistic practitioners. All the information is helpful so it really depends on where you are in dealing with stress. A good place to start is the last section that's titled: Other Self Care Reminders. These are easy and practical suggestions to get you started.

### Self Care Tip Sheet



### **Workplace Stress & Self-Care Articles**

<http://careerplanning.about.com/library/weekly/aa021501a.htm>

<http://www.mbmi.org/>

<http://www.stressfree.com/>

<https://www.stress.org/>

<http://www.lifechallenges.org/create/creative.html>

<http://thegreatillusion.com/>

<http://www.workout.com/>

<http://www.lifechallenges.org/create/creative.html>

<http://thegreatillusion.com/>

<http://www.workout.com/>

### **Directories to Holistic Practitioners**

<http://holistic.com/>

<http://healthylivingresources.com/>

## Other Self Care Reminders

- Journal / meditate
- Keep a grateful list / write grateful letters
- Have fun. Moderation + Variety = Balance
- Keep a positive focus during transition - use the time for self-growth.
- Reach out, network, ask for support, create a success team
- Stay aware and mindful - visualize the end result but focus on the process.
- Take charge of yourself not others. Discover your needs/values - get them met.
- Handle your past - the way you react to others/stress may be more about you.

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