

Coping with Job Stress  
By  
Irene M. Swerdlow-Freed, Psy.D.

Recent referrals to our practice have reflected the economic upheaval of today's society. More and more adults are seeking assistance as they cope with the stress of successfully surviving company downsizing, reorganizations and mergers. Often these adults are experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety. All are highly stressed as they attempt to manage their own workload and additional tasks forced upon them as co-workers have been laid off or fired. In addition, there is the psychological stress of not knowing when a layoff notice will make it into their paycheck envelope.

Many employees feel guilty if they "complain" about their workload or the stressful work environment because they still have a job. Although most employees are aware through media reports and articles that the unemployed are at risk for increased despair, worry, and family quarrels, they do not realize that it is normal for those who are still employed to also feel increased stress, depression and anxiety.

In the current environment, workload may be significantly and, at times, unrealistically increased. Employees are often ill-informed about their employer's future plans, and a competitiveness or mistrust can develop as concerns about future layoffs increase. There may also be an overall sense of disorganization as the lines of communication and authority are disrupted. Pressure to get work completed quickly and efficiently with less manpower lead workers to increase their hours, give up lunchtime and breaks, and take work home. Some workers are able to sustain this accelerated level of activity for months, before they begin to experience physical and emotional signs that all is not well. Others turn to sleeping pills, alcohol or caffeine in an attempt to manage the stress of their situation.

The first sign of difficulty is often physical. Workers experience symptoms such as colds, fatigue, stomach upset, headaches, and muscle spasms. As the work pressure increases, there are emotional and psychological changes. Workers become irritable and demanding or withdraw from others both at work and at home. Some experience difficulty concentrating and make more frequent errors. Others have trouble sleeping, difficulty controlling feelings of anger or find themselves becoming tearful at work.

Often patients seek psychotherapy only after significant distress. For example, an individual may experience a panic attack; a stress reaction characterized by racing heartbeat, difficulty breathing, dizziness, and chest pains. These workers often go to a hospital emergency room, fearing that they are having a heart attack. Others seek assistance after they experience thoughts of harming themselves or others.

Effective treatment is multifaceted. We identify the aspects of the work environment that are particularly stressful and develop a plan to address the situation directly and indirectly. We assist the individual in realistically evaluating the workload and examining the thoughts and feelings that impact work performance. Together we develop

appropriate supports at work and at home. We explore the myths and fallacies that interfere with the development of an effective and viable plan of action and lay to rest thoughts such as “everyone else seems able to meet the extra demands...”, “I have no control over the situation...”, “I’m not able to do it because I’m too slow...”, “the work must be completed at whatever the cost”.

We help our patients to see that they do not need to resolve the difficult situation on their own. Often supervisors have been responsive to employees who request assistance in prioritizing the additional workload or clarifying the lines of responsibility. Families who have been scared off by the worker’s temper or crying outbursts are helped to understand the problems and to facilitate support at home. In addition, when necessary, we coordinate our efforts with the patient’s physician or a psychiatrist to utilize medication as an additional support in addressing the anxiety or the depression.

As with any problem, addressing the situation early can avert greater difficulties. We encourage individuals to recognize the early warning signs of excessive stress and we welcome calls about the appropriateness of psychological intervention.

For more information or to make an appointment, please call Swerdlow-Freed Psychology at (248) 539-7777. Our offices are conveniently located at 30600 Northwestern Highway, Suite 210, Farmington Hills, Michigan 48334, and 55 North Pond Drive, Suite 6, Walled Lake, Michigan 48390.