Is Your Work Killing You?



Workplace stress is bad for your heart," says Michael Miller, MD, director of the Center for Preventive Cardiology at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and author of *Heal Your Heart*.

Signs of job stress include:

1. Your heart races, your palms sweat, and your blood pressure goes way up.
2. You feel tired and cranky, and you snap at your family and friends.
3. You have trouble sleeping and concentrating.
4. You catch colds more often and have trouble shaking them off.
5. You "self-medicate" with a tub of ice cream or an extra glass of wine.

If you've got a job like this, your chance of having a heart attack goes up.

Stress releases hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. Job stress that is short-lived, holiday or seasonal work, for example, is easier for your body to bounce back from this flood of hormones. But prolonged stress means your body stays flooded with these hormones and starts converting them into cholesterol. This can lead to heart disease.

Ask yourself the following questions from Redford Williams, MD, head of behavioral medicine at Duke University School of Medicine.

1. Does the stress cause problems with how well I do my job? Is it hard to focus?
2. Do my co-workers feel the same way?
3. Does the stress trouble my relationships at home? Do I snap at family members, avoid friends, and argue over little things?
4. Does it affect my physical health? Do I get sick more often, feel tired all the time, eat or sleep poorly, or drink more than usual?
5. Do my friends and family tell me I'm not my usual self?

Dr. Williams explains that if you answered yes to one or more of these, you've got workplace stress and it needs to be managed. He offers the following advice.

Speak Up

If you think it's worth the effort to try and change the stressors/stressful situation, speak up. Talk to your manager and explain your concerns and offer a solution such as:

- More time to complete a task.

- Help setting priorities.
- Training for a different role.

Doing this – taking control of the problem – will result in a drop of levels of anxiety, depression, and blood pressure.

Use Your Resources

Psychologist David Ballard, PsyD, specializes in employee wellness suggests talking to your human resources department about what stress-management and wellness options are available to employees.

Relax and Chill

On the other hand, you might decide that your energy is better spent on relaxation. “The key is to find behaviors that get you back to your pre-stress levels,” Ballard says. He recommends these tips:

1. Have fun in your off-hours. Find an activity you love and throw yourself into it. Maybe it’s volunteering or joining a theatre group or singing in a choir. The only rule? Enjoy yourself and don’t think about work.
2. Find ways to unwind. Try a hobby, sports, reading, meditation or prayer, or anything else you enjoy that enhances your life.
3. Get up from your desk a couple of times an hour and stretch. Or take a walk on your lunch break. Spending time in green spaces like parks can curb feelings of depression and anxiety.
4. Connect with others. “When you’re stressed out, you tend to disconnect from your relationships. And that’s exactly the opposite of what you need,” Ballard says. Isolating yourself can raise your risk for heart disease. Your friends can help you get through the rocky times, so keep them close.