Stress Risk Factors: Fatality Report



INCIDENT

TRAVELLING through New York on a train, Catherine Plano suddenly felt as though the carriage was caving in. She couldn’t breathe, her hands felt numb and she lost all sensation in her legs. The high-flying Melbourne executive and mother was convinced she was dying.

Catherine feels ridiculous recounting her visceral fear now, but while she wasn’t having a heart attack, that moment changed things for her forever.

“Everything was closing down, the sound was muffled,” she said Everything was drawing in on me, I couldn’t get my breath in. You don’t get enough oxygen.”

The panic attacks continued for another six months, to the point where she couldn’t leave the house. “It was probably one of the darkest times of my life,” she said.

“I was very depressed. I didn’t want to leave the house or my husband.

“I’d be waking in the middle of the night with a panic attack. I’d be crawling on the floor.

“There’s a stigma attached. I was really scared it would happen in public. It was shame. It cripples you.”

Catherine had brought her son Jordan up alone, so to have to rely on new husband Andoni was a shock. “I was a single mum, independent, to have someone look after me, I was really embarrassed. And he saw me in a different light, he didn’t see me as a strong woman, he saw me as a weak, frail thing.”

Catherine was a victim of Australia’s workplace stress crisis, putting in longer and longer hours at the expense of her mental health, pushing herself to the point that she had developed chronic anxiety.

NEED TO KNOW

There are no conveyor belts, forklifts or swing booms lurking in the sky. All you can see are people sitting at work stations with their heads down at working away on their computers. But there is danger in this workplace scene. There is a deadly workplace crisis which is seething and swirling in epidemic fashion.

The pressure is mounting on the daily lives of workers with a cocktail of stress, financial issues, job insecurity and isolation. Workers are being killed.

BUSINESS / REGULATIONS

A massive 20 per cent of suicides are linked to work.

It is one of the most critical threats to society – damaging our health and relationships, costing the economy and endangering our lives. Mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety cost billions.

But still we do not always treat these issues with the necessary gravity.

Part of the problem is “optics”. A person with a broken arm has a difficult time lifting objects so you can understand that person needs help to lift things. But mental illness is invisible and people can hide.

There are people who have developed severe work-related mental health disorders, contemplated suicide or loved someone who took their own life because of a job. Researchers address this so-called “modern epidemic”.

The research shows there are a number of clear risk factors in a job that lead a person to develop mental health issues and potentially attempt suicide.

Three main risk factors are:

- Job strain. A combination of a psychologically demanding workplace, combined with employees not having much control over what they do minute to minute, day to day.”

Job strain can involve a lack of resources, engagement, exposure to extreme stress and long hours.

- Then there’s a lack of respect or value. This could involve being bullied, sexually harassed or ignored. Bosses who are not open or fair in their decision-making can generate feelings of resentment and misery in employees.
- The third major factor is occupational uncertainty. Workers whose jobs are insecure are likely to be under more stress than others, particularly if finances are an issue. During the global financial crisis in 2008, as concerns over job security soared, deaths by suicide increased by almost 5000 across the developed world.

Job insecurity partially explains why low-paying contractors are at more risk of suicide than others. Other jobs with elevated rates of suicide are doctors, nurses, vets, lawyers and bankers. This is attributed to high demand, long hours, hierarchy, gender norms and – in the case of medical professions – daily trauma and access to the means to take your life.

Poor mental wellbeing is typically the result of a combination of individual vulnerabilities, social factors and environmental triggers. Men are more at risk than women, and people living in rural areas are at more danger of suicide.

A difficult work situation could exacerbate other issues in someone’s life – whether a relationship breakdown, financial stress, bereavement, genetic predisposition to depression, substance abuse, isolation or sexual harassment.

Suicide has a massive ripple. Number don’t really provide a true indication of how much suicide really affects workers and people around them.

Catherine now makes her mental health a priority, using meditation, writing and a healthy lifestyle to shift her thinking. She also speaks openly about her struggles

with anxiety, and says the number of people coming forward with their own stories only seems to be growing.

“I look on it as a gift,” said executive Catherine, now a successful speaker and author, who still occasionally suffers panic attacks. “Life is completely different. Health hadn’t been a priority. I was a single mum, a workaholic.

“I had all this pressure, I felt overwhelmed. You love what you do, you just keep pushing it.”

She now makes a point of switching off at 8.30pm, putting her phone in her study and not taking it out until after she has had eight hours sleep and meditated in the morning. She avoids her panic triggers, which include news stories about mothers getting shot in front of their children.

“How often do we get time out to pause?” she said. “We live in a fast-paced environment, not conscious of what we’re thinking about, emotions are high, you’re contactable all the time.

“Now I take a full day out, on Sunday I do things I love to do, I plan it in diary or it doesn’t happen. I take time off.”

STATISTICS

The workplace was the fifth leading cause of death in the US, responsible for some 120,000 deaths and approximately $190 billion in additional costs each year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Work is one of the leading causes of stress, and the physiological effects of stress on blood chemistry, including cholesterol levels, the immune system, and metabolic functioning have been well-established.

This represents 5% to 8% of national health care spending derived primarily from high demands at work (48 billion) lack of insurance (10 billion) and work – family conflict (24 billion)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention research:

- From 2000 to 2016, the U.S. suicide rate among adults ages 16 to 64 rose 34 percent, from 12.9 deaths for every 100,000 people in the population to 17.3 per 100,000.
- The highest suicide rate among men was for workers in construction and mining jobs, with 43.6 deaths for every 100,000 workers in 2012 and 53.2 deaths per 100,000 in 2015.
- The highest suicide rate among women was for workers in arts, design, entertainment, sports and media, with 11.7 fatalities for every 100,000 workers in 2012 and 15.6 deaths per 100,000 in 2015.

PREVENTION

We have seen from statistical studies how excessive stress in the workplace impacts business, employees, economy, and the community at large. There is a growing recognition that workplace stress is not “hidden epidemic”

Workplace stress can significantly impact the bottom line; however, it can also be managed to improve productivity, employee health and to create a more positive workplace climate and culture.

Preventive STEPS – “What to do:”

- Training for leaders and supervisors on effective ways to reduce stress;
- Working with employees to create challenging but realistic goals for optimal performance;
- Communicating clearly and managing conflicts respectfully;
- Identifying and using employees' strengths and skills for career advancement;
- Compensating fairly;
- Ensuring safe work conditions;
- Modeling work-life balance;
- Building in opportunities to formally recognize individual and team goal achievement;
- Creating a work climate that encourages social support and connectedness; and
- Developing ways to reflect on positive daily workplace events and accomplishments.

Adopting effective stress reduction strategies also holds promise in preventing depression which can be costly to employers.

Targeted early identification and intervention level: offer employees the following options:

- Stress screenings and information on stress reduction and the early warning signs of mental health conditions;
- Effective intervention programs like cognitive-behavioral therapy for stress management;
- Programs that effectively address stress like mindfulness, relaxation, yoga and tai chi and encourage exercise, emphasizing the value to mental and physical health; and
- Programs that improve resiliency.

Web-based and mobile stress management programs offer employers cost-effective options for reducing workplace stress.

Intensive individualized support level:

- Assist employees in accessing effective care and supports;
- Initiate active outreach to employees out on disability;
- Support employees in remaining engaged with supervisors and co-workers;
- Develop effective transition and return to work policies and practices; and
- Consider ADA accommodations that help employees stay on the job.

Early detention and management of workplace stress can positively affect all the stakeholders.

It is comfortable to draw the conclusion that preventive action at the outset clearly "Trumps" billions spent later on in the process and underscore the well – warn refrain that "an ounce of prevention fetches a pound of cure."