

STRESS AND SAFETY

Stress was already the health epidemic of the century and now it's amplified. Look for signs and help others.

DEFINING STRESS

We all know what it feels like to be stressed. Our blood pressure rises, we feel anxious, our hearts beat faster and we may break out in a cold sweat.

Stress is a natural bodily response to an adverse situation. It's often called the fight-or-flight response.

Most of us don't come face to face with too many acute dangers. (When was the last time a lion jumped out of the bushes and tried to maul you?)

However, we *do* face a lot of chronic stressors—unpaid bills, production deadlines, social anxiety and any number of other pressures. And now COVID-19.

These produce a constant stream of hormones and other chemicals that takes its toll on our bodies and minds. And this has a huge impact on safety and health.

WHY STRESS IS A SAFETY PROBLEM

Over 50% of people feel that stress negatively affects their work productivity.

Stress is one of the most prevalent human factors among the working population. It's also one of the most dangerous because it directly increases workers' risk levels and exacerbates other human factors too.

When people are stressed, they pay less attention. And when people don't pay attention to what they're doing, they're more likely to get injured.

Stress makes people rush more and get more easily frustrated. It also makes people more susceptible to fatigue and more likely to become complacent.

In short, ***stress gets people hurt and killed.***

And left unchecked, stress leads to many mental and physical health problems.



WHAT TO DO ABOUT STRESS?

Managers and supervisors can't make every stressor disappear—especially those outside of work. But you can give workers the know-how to identify stress in themselves and others, and the tools to deal with stress when it occurs.

Here are three essential components of a safety-centric stress reduction program:

- Look for causes or contributors of stress in the workplace you can control and be mindful of those outside of your control.
- Help employees recognize stress when it happens.
- Provide real-time skills to reduce and eliminate stress and its effects.

How well is your workplace doing at each of these components? Take a few moments to consider each one—and see if there's more you can do to reduce stress's impact on employee safety.

Look for workplace causes of stress

The workplace can be a major source of stress. Identifying stressors in the work environment—and dealing with them—will go a long way to reducing the overall strain placed on employees.

Here's a checklist of key causes of stress:

Structural

- Insufficient resources/equipment
- Long hours
- Heavy workload
- Tight deadlines
- Risk of infection
- Job precarity/insecurity

Cultural

- Weak culture
- Harassment
- Discrimination
- Organizational changes
- Supervisory issues

Personal

- Real/perceived lack of protection from known hazards
- Fear of infection
- Changes to duties
- Lack of skills for the job
- Long commute

The majority of stressors are structural, which means they're built into the job. But many of them can still be minimized or compensated for. For example, if employees suffer from a lack of agency, find ways to give them a small measure of control by offering them input on meaningful safety issues.

Help employees identify stress

Before workers can mitigate the effects of stress, they need to understand what stress looks like.

Common Signs of Stress:

Physical

- Fatigue
- Tensing muscles
- Headaches
- Heart palpitations
- Trouble sleeping
- Upset stomach

Psychological

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions

It takes time for people to internalize these signs. You can't just ask people to be mindful of these symptoms. Instead, you need to use a number of proven learning techniques to help people:

- understand the importance of combating chronic stress
- recognize the signs of rising stress levels
- develop practical skills to reduce stress (and mitigate its impact on safety in the meantime)

Depending on the nature of your workforce, this means a variety of short educational sessions, exercises and discussions over several weeks or months. It can be a fair amount of work—but it's worth it.

Real-time stress reduction skills

Employees need two essential skills: the knowledge of how to reduce the amount of stress in their lives, and the ability to effectively deal with stress as it happens. This means updating your wellness program.

- For situations like the coronavirus, ensure they know how to protect themselves and their family members, and let them know they're not alone—even in isolation, and ensure their supervisor is watching for signs of stress.
- Provide education on different lifestyle practices that can reduce stress, like changes to diet, exercise and sleeping.
- Offer resources that will bolster employees as they integrate these practices into their daily routines.
- Give workers ongoing support and motivation, because changing wellness habits can take a while.

Stress is a human factor that is intertwined with other dangerous human factors like rushing, frustration, fatigue and complacency. Workers need to know how to manage stress when it arises—and be able to mitigate its impact on their personal safety. Providing workers with training on addressing human factors can drastically reduce the number of safety incidents that result from stress and other personal states.