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Companies make greater effort to reduce work stress

The Big Chill

Pittsburgh Business Times - by [Erin Lawley](#)

If you hold a rubber band between your hands and gradually pull it more and more taut, it will eventually snap.

The same is true of people and stress.

Each stressor encountered throughout the day stretches you just a little bit thinner than before, and without some positive experiences to counteract the tension, you may just break.

This scenario is of concern to employers, says Joanne Sujansky, CEO of business consulting firm **Key Group**, as stress can impact the quality of their work force.

"We want employees to be resilient for their own health, but also so that they can be productive," she said.

When stress is not mitigated, the impact on businesses is dramatic.

Eighty percent of American workers say they experience stress in the workplace, according to the American Institute of Stress.

That stress results in more than \$300 billion lost by U.S. companies annually from stress-related absenteeism, accidents, turnover, lower productivity and workers' compensation, as well as direct legal, medical and insurance costs.

Multiple culprits

"All jobs have some stress involved," said Jim Craft, professor at the University of Pittsburgh's Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business. "Some stress is useful in the sense of a motivating tool. The problem comes when it's excessive and becomes disabling."

Both work and nonwork-related factors can add to employee's stress level, Craft said. At work, causes include excessive workload, the demand of long hours with low pay, a noisy or dangerous work environment, poor planning and communication from management and an employee's seemingly constant connection to work demands through e-mail, cell phones and the like.

Even seemingly positive work events, such as a promotion, can cause stress because the recipient may not feel ready to accept new responsibilities, Craft said.



Joe Wojcik

Employees at Downtown accounting firm Sisterson & Co. learn about progressive muscle relaxation in a Highmark stress management class taught by Sheila Farina, an RN from West Penn Hospital's Forbes Regional campus.

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Stress also comes from challenges outside the office, which can never be fully ignored during the workday.

"Whether worrying about a child-care situation, or how to get to the grocery store or how to get to the doctor, all that stress makes stress at work even worse," said Bradley Lusk, partner at Downtown accounting firm Sisterson & Co.

How to Deal

Jo Ann Meier, executive director of Susan G. Komen for the Cure's Pittsburgh office, said it's difficult to avoid stress in her workplace, where a small number of people are constantly worrying about meeting fundraising goals and running major events.

"One of the most important things about combating stress is opening the lines of communication," said Meier, who announced in July she would step down Jan. 1.

If employees and managers communicate about workload, job expectations and any stress the employee is feeling, they often find a way to diffuse the situation, she said.

At the **Port Authority of Allegheny County**, drivers receive continual training for stressful work scenarios -- such as handling passengers who refuse to pay fares and being cut off by motorists.

"A lot has to roll off their shoulders. A lot has to be let go," said Rich Wojnar, assistant director of road operations.

Promoting work-life balance through flexible schedules and telecommuting help employees at Marshall-based medical device company **Medrad Inc.**, said Human Resources Director Karen Zelenski.

"So you could work four 10-hour days and have one day off," using that day off to take care of all the other things people have going on in their lives, Zelenski said.

Sisterson & Co. instituted a wellness program six months ago, which include seminars on stress management, to help mitigate employee stress.

The program, which promotes healthy habits such as choosing good-for-you foods and smoking cessation, has prompted a group of employees to wear pedometers and set goals for taking a certain number of steps each day.

And of course, the little things help, too.

During stressful times of the year, Sisterson often orders lunch for employees and brings in someone to provide chair massages, and Medrad provides a dry cleaning service for employees.

"The little things hopefully indicate that we do care about our people," Lusk said. "People are by far our most important resource."

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