

Getting a grip on workplace stress

By STEPHANIE WEI
Special to The Toronto Sun

Erin O'Rourke (not her real name) remembers the frustration of working with an incompetent manager. "It was a nightmare," she recalls. "She couldn't communicate with her staff, she would take credit for our work, and she would use us to take the fall for her."

As the conflict and petty power trips escalated, the office became like a minefield. Afraid to complain to superiors for fear of reprisal, O'Rourke kept quiet, avoiding her manager. "Constantly bottling up my stress made me feel stressed out and powerless. I was completely unmotivated to perform."

O'Rourke's anxiety began to show itself in some of the physical symptoms of stress: exhaustion, insomnia, neck and back tension and recurring infections. At an out-of-town company conference, O'Rourke came down with a kidney infection that confined her to bed for days.

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) defines workplace stress as the harmful physical and emotional responses that can happen when there is a conflict between a job's demands and the amount of control an employee has over meeting these demands.

According to a recent Canadian Policy Research Network paper, high stress on the job is twice as common today as it was 10 years ago.

In the past decade, people have been working longer hours and taking home more work. Further, job satisfaction and commitment to employers

has decreased dramatically, while higher rates of depression and absenteeism are being reported.

Rose Pirone, manager of human resources and administration at Professional Engineers Ontario, a provincial regulatory body, describes how stress in the workplace affects the home life, and vice versa.

"People are finding they have more and more demands on their time and fewer forms of support," Pirone says. "Families feel the pressures of factors such as double careers and single parenthood more than ever before."

"People are used to having information at their fingertips now, they need to produce instant results," Pirone adds. "Workers who have difficulty keeping up feel a loss of control over their ability to perform their jobs well, which leads to a tremendous sense of anxiety."

Continued on page 3



Continued from page 1

According to a 1999 Pitney Bowes study, Canadian workers send and receive an average of 190 messages per day.

Elizabeth White, M.Ed., T.E.P., is a former life skills coach and trainer with the YWCA, who is currently the PR chair of the Ontario Society of Psychotherapists. She attributes workplace stress to the uncertainty in today's work environment.

"In a poor economy, you feel expendable," White says. "With restructuring and constant workplace change, individuals have to be responsible for their own futures, which can play havoc with their emotional well-being."

The increasing alienation between workers and their employers has compounded stress levels.

"The relationship used to be based on mutual loyalty. The personal investment isn't there anymore. The relationship has become distant, even cutthroat," White says. "If people are let go, there is often no goodbye, no recognition of their contribution."

White describes one workplace which had a room referred to by employees as the "departure lounge." "Once you went in, you didn't come out. Situations like that can really affect people's sense of value."

The impact on employers is considerable. According to the Global Business and Ec-

onomic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, high turnover, employee absenteeism rates and treatment of stress-related illnesses such as depression cost the Canadian economy an estimated \$30 billion per year.

Pirone describes cases where individuals react to stress by becoming very demanding and bullying.

"They lose sight of the present and switch into panic mode, quickly experiencing burnout," Pirone says. "With high turnover, employees lose interest in helping each other, there's a lack of teamwork. People can become self-serving, which leads to a negative environment."

Companies are starting to look at ways to help employees deal with work-related stress.

According to the 2001 Canadian Mental Health Survey, conducted on behalf of the CMHA, 60% of Canadians said their bosses were effective in dealing with stress in the workplace.

"Flex time, telecommuting, exercise facilities and benefits packages that include therapy are becoming more common," Pirone says. "Employers are more understanding of employees who need special leave."

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MANAGING STRESS

For the individual dealing with stress, experts recommend the following:

1. Recognize your symptoms.
 2. Use relaxation techniques such as meditation or massage.
 3. Exercise and keep active.
 4. Manage your time effectively and prioritize.
 5. Watch your diet.
 6. Get enough rest and sleep.
 7. Talk with others, either friends, professional counsellors, support groups or family.
 8. Get away for a while: Make sure you have some time for yourself.
- "You need to be open with your problems," Pirone says. "Keep the lines of communication at work open. Develop a buddy system, co-workers you are comfortable with that you can use as a sounding board."

White recommends working on developing a range of coping mechanisms. "Whether your response is to be accommodating, hostile, implement change or to withdraw, you have to

understand your defensive style, and identify your other options."

She says that balance is the key to coping with work-related stress. "People need to make sure they balance workplace demands with other things that give their lives more dimension."

For more information, contact:

The Canadian Mental Health Association
www.cmha.ca
416-484-7750

The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety
www.ccohs.ca
1-800-664-4284

The Ontario Society of Psychotherapists
www.psychotherapyontario.com
416-923-4050