

Is work stressing you out?

In our fast paced society, stress has become part of our lives – especially in our workplace. We all find different things stressful and can experience various signs and symptoms as a result of feeling stressed. Are the pressures at work stressing you out? Are you coping with the high demands placed on you? You might not be managing your workload and your work performance may be suffering. If you're unable to concentrate or you're beginning to feel tired, unwell and you're taking lots of sick leave, you may need to consider making some changes to help you manage stressful situations better. Getting the balance right will help you deal with stress in a positive way and lead to a healthier lifestyle.

Why should you bother? You may feel that you are coping well with stress, but do you know that work stress can cause cardiovascular disease and that stress is bad for you if you've already had a heart attack? Although it is not a major risk factor, there is evidence that stress can contribute to cardiovascular disease in some people. Research studies have found that people are more likely to feel stressed when they feel they have little control over their work and have lots of demands placed on them.

Perhaps it may not be practical to change your job, but you can take steps to manage stress at work. Bear in mind that it is not stress by itself that causes heart disease or stroke, but an unhealthy response to stress that may lead to other risky behaviours such as smoking, drinking too much alcohol, overeating or skipping meals and eating high-fat, convenience foods. Other risk factors like physical inactivity, high blood cholesterol, and a family history of cardiovascular disease all act together with stress and contribute to your risk of heart disease or stroke.

For some people who have angina or who have had a heart attack, extreme stress could trigger an angina attack. However, be wary of cutting out all forms of stress or physical activity as some stress may actually be positive and help speed up your recovery, especially if it is a rewarding activity. You may even find that boredom is just as stressful as having too much to do! A certain amount of stress may help you feel motivated and enthusiastic. It is only when there is too much stress for too long that it becomes unhealthy. Although stress may not lead to another stroke in stroke survivors who have gone back to work, it may predispose you to smoking or over-eating so it would be worthwhile trying to address the cause of your stress.

Prevent stress from spiraling out of control as job anxiety can be harmful and damage your health and performance. If you can pinpoint exactly what is causing the stress at work, you will be able to take steps to help you manage your working day.

Ways to reduce stress in your workplace:

- Identify what you are feeling and talk about it to a sympathetic colleague or friend.
- Work out what your priorities are and drop the less important things.
- If you have trouble managing your workload, talk to your manager about going on a time management course.
- Become more assertive by learning to say no or delegate when you feel over-burdened.
- Handle challenges and face difficult decisions - don't ignore them or procrastinate. Effective problem solving and decision-making will help relieve stress.
- Let go of perfectionism and allow for mistakes or delays that are inevitable.
- Make the effort to leave work on time at least twice a week and use the extra time to do your favourite hobby or physical activity.
- Make more time for rest and relaxation. Having a good night's sleep will help you cope with stressful situations.
- Make sure you have lunch every day, even when you are really busy and eat more fruit and vegetables. Avoid too much refined, processed or convenience foods that are high in fat and salt. A healthy diet is a good stress coping mechanism.
- Drink plenty of water and reduce your caffeine intake (in cola, coffee, tea or chocolate).
- Quit smoking and cut down on alcohol.

By making a few small changes and getting the balance right, you will be well on the way to a healthier lifestyle. You will probably find that you feel more positive, have more energy and are better able to cope with stressful situations in your workplace.

During Corporate Wellness Week (4-8 July), the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA would like to encourage companies to participate in creating awareness about cardiovascular disease and its risk factors amongst their staff. Be proactive by enquiring about our Corporate Wellness Programme, which offers blood pressure, cholesterol, glucose and BMI screenings, for a nominal fee, in a bid to encourage healthier living and ensure that you have a healthy workforce.

For more information on general heart health contact the Heart Mark Diet Line on 0860 223 222, email heart@heartfoundation.co.za or visit www.heartfoundation.co.za.

Written by Erika Ketterer, Dietician at the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA.