Is Workplace Stress Toxic to Your System?

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As our nation soldiers on through an economic downturn of historic proportions, many people are faced with the seemingly endless prospect of unemployment (or underemployment) and the gnawing sense of uncertainty that comes with it. When you’re stuck in a difficult situation with no apparent way out, you are a prime candidate for the kind of stress that taxes mind, body and spirit.

That is not to say that those of us who are fortunate enough to have steady employment are feeling particularly relaxed and empowered. It is often just the opposite. More and more employed Americans are being asked to do more with less, to stay late and arrive early. Many have had salaries and benefits cut.

While you may be the envy of your unemployed friends and family members and feel grateful for your job, having a job these days can be an emotional and physical challenge. More than ever before, the levels of stress we are experiencing in today’s workplace can be downright unhealthy.

Toxic is stressful, but stressful may not be toxic

If your stressful workplace is also a toxic workplace then your difficulties are compounded. Your body, however, tends to experience the two in much the same way. However, in a toxic work environment lines are crossed that go beyond typical stress. Your very presence at work, your tasks and your relations with co-workers are infused with the kind of vulnerability (fear, anger, lack of trust) and negativity that often leads to maladaptive responses such as high absenteeism, poor work performance, turf wars and personality conflicts.

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On the other hand, a stressful workplace does not necessarily imply a toxic workplace, and does not, in fact, have to be harmful provided you know what steps you can take to keep the stress demons at bay.

Stress 101

In and of itself, stress is not a bad thing; in fact, it is necessary for adaptation. It is one of the ways our bodies help us react to change and can actually assist us in meeting significant challenges like giving an important presentation, interviewing for a desired job, or skiing down a difficult slope on an unfamiliar mountain. Heart and respiration rates go up, blood pressure rises, muscles become tense and our over-
all metabolism speeds up. It is called the stress response, and when the challenge ends and we have re-established balance and homeostasis, so, hopefully, does the response.

Most of us, however, associate stress with our emotional and physical responses to real or perceived threats. Our ancestors experienced the stress response when confronted with the need to either fight or to escape from enemies. In the modern world, work-related stress can arise from a difficult commute, feeling overwhelmed by task overload, dealing with a dismissive or incompetent colleague or even having to constantly master new skills in our ever-evolving high-tech culture. When stress becomes constant and cumulative, and when we don’t get enough opportunities to recover from the stressors and restore ourselves, we are at higher risk for a variety of potentially serious problems that can affect our minds and our bodies.

Chemistry at work

Whether it’s an oncoming train, or a twenty-page report that landed in your lap and needs to be finished by Friday, the message quickly arrives in your hypothalamus (a base part of your brain connected to your autonomic nervous system), which then secretes hormones that instruct your pituitary gland to regulate the release of several other hormones—one of which activates your adrenal cortex and causes it to synthesize and release cortisol into your blood stream.

Cortisol (a glucocorticoid sometimes called “steroid hormone”) is a compound, in addition to adrenaline, that triggers the physical reactions to stress mentioned above. Again, when faced with a short-term threat, these reactions give your body and mind their greatest ability to successfully fight or escape danger. But chronic supplies of cortisol in the bloodstream have the potential to contribute to serious health problems. These days, the workplace is a major contributor to chronic stress.

Over time, consistently high levels of cortisol and other stress hormones in the bloodstream can contribute to problems including diabetes, hypertension, gastrointestinal disorders, heart disease and stroke. Cortisol can also compromise the body’s immune system increasing your susceptibility to infectious diseases. Other problems linked to high cortisol levels include weight gain, depression, irritability, anxiety, insomnia and loss of memory. Taken together, chronic stress at work can be the key to the door that leads to what most people call “burnout.”

**Stress epidemic**

In my clinical practice, I see a large number of patients who are struggling with work-related stress. I also treat a fair number of patients, many in high-level professional positions, who are mistakenly convinced that they can somehow manage their stress level. They submit themselves to enormous amounts of job pressure for weeks or months on end and seem somewhat surprised when they arrive in my office deeply fatigued, agitated and depressed.

Many employees are suffering a steady “trickle down” of worry and uncertainty from the economic strain their organizations are experiencing. This alone can put the sense of personal identity and empowerment that many of us derive from our jobs on shaky ground as it may call into question our ability to meet our and our families' needs.

If your stressful work place is also a toxic workplace, your challenges are magnified. The signs of a toxic workplace can include an unpredictable and domineering or controlling boss, an atmosphere of expectations that are not possible to meet, lack of tolerance for mistakes and, most of all, the experience that you are not empowered to effect positive change within the organization. In such circumstances, the moments of joy, satisfaction, laughter, creativity and vitality are hard to come by.

Short of leaving such a situation (a choice that may be complicated due to many reasons including the current economy) you can still benefit from learning methods to minimize your own stress. For example, while you cannot control the actions of others, you can certainly make an honest self-assessment and begin to adjust your own outlook. For example, are you the kind of person who believes you need to resolve all the difficulties in your workplace? If so, you may be able to help yourself by rethinking the fit between yourself and the place you work. Maybe you are internalizing more than you need to.

Perhaps this is a time to invest in your own development; for example, taking a college course, improving your computer skills or working with a job or career coach. You may also consider seeking out counseling or psychotherapy to further develop your psychological strengths and address your vulnerabilities. Explore a personal interest—take that yoga, dance or cooking class that you always meant to do, or learn to play a musical instrument.
Breaking the stress habit

I encourage my patients to experiment with a number of techniques that have been shown to ease the symptoms of stress and to evoke the relaxation response—a set of physiological changes that counteract the “fight or flight” reaction by reducing stimulation to certain parts of the hypothalamus. These techniques include diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscular relaxation, mindfulness or meditation, and guided imagery. With time, any one of these activities can help you restore a sense of balance and reduce the deleterious effects of work-related stress on your body and mind.

The point is that rather than trying to significantly change the environment where you work—an impossible order for most of us—you can increase your chances of minimizing workplace stress by taking steps to develop yourself.

Take some time to clarify what exactly makes your work environment toxic or stressful and look closely at each factor. You may be surprised that it is just one or two scenarios that have a consistently negative effect on you. Once you have narrowed them down, then try to problem solve for each one. For example, if your boss is a stickler for following protocol on some days, and more relaxed about rules and regulations on others, then make sure you stick to the book. Always. You will eliminate such uncertainty, avoid a distressing response from your boss, and reduce the likelihood of triggering your stress response.

You can also ask yourself important questions about the factors that keep you working in a particular job that may be stressful. Can they be changed? This is also an excellent time to reevaluate your personal values and professional goals. Do you want to continue in a particular organization or career path? Is your work and work environment aligned with your values?

Your most important goal should be reaching a place where you can empower yourself and maintain a sense of balance and health. Good and bad economies come and go. Either way, the workplace will always present the kinds of challenges that can contribute to unhealthy stress. Many factors contribute to stress on the job, and some are simply not within your sphere of control. Fortunately, your ability to change the way you react is not one of them.

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